

I've been everywhere that you've been

Now I've got nothing to lose and everything to win

'Because The Night

Est

It's past 1:00 AM when I finally hang up with Tui.

The call wasn't short. It started with the necessary logistics—confirming the time for William's revisions, talking about the light quality in his apartment, surprisingly good, Tui noted, and then—as always happens when we talk for more than five minutes—it devolved into something else entirely.

"So, the shoot went well?" Tui asked after I recounted the strange, silent morning.

"It went...unexpected." I admitted, pacing the length of my apartment. "He talked, Like he finally had to empty the bucket."

"And you listened." Tui stated, not a question.

"I listened, He builds these walls, but you can see the anxiety vibrating in the concrete. He's so used to being the detached observer, the one who controls the frame, that being the subject is like dismantling his entire operating system." Silence on the line. Tui was probably sketching something in his apartment, his creative mind already processing the drama.

"He's not like anyone I've ever met." I confessed, stopping my pacing. "He's harsh, but there's this incredible depth under the anger. I saw it in the painting he was hiding. It's... overwhelming."

"Yeah, that's chaotic" Tui said, a note of weary familiarity in his voice. "He's a masterpiece of contradiction. I worry about you, Est."

"He's terrified of abandonment. If he lets you close, and you leave, it'll crush him. I've seen it happen." My heart sank. I knew Tui spoke from experience—his own disastrous relationship, the way he guarded his affection now.

"I'm not leaving." I said, perhaps too quickly, too fiercely.

"I know you're not leaving now." Tui countered gently. "But He doesn't know that. He just knows how to brace for impact. Be careful, Est. With him, it's high stakes."

"I know." I repeated, feeling the weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders. "I'm just... intensely curious. I want to know why he paints absence when he's surrounded by so much complexity. I want to know what happens when he laughs without guarding his face." I felt a strange heat rising in my chest, a dangerous curiosity turning into something warmer, stickier, harder to control. "Curiosity killed

the cat, Tui.” I murmured, suddenly feeling very old and very young simultaneously.

“And satisfaction brought it back.” Tui shot back, but the lightness was gone. “Est, be careful. You’re an open book. You wear your feelings on your sleeve. And the kind of intensity you have... it might scare him away before he even lets himself want you.”

“Want me?” I scoffed, trying to sound indifferent. “Tui, I’m just trying to get a decent portfolio together so I can pay my rent and not sleep in the studio. I’m not trying to solve the existential crisis of the reclusive painter.” But as soon as the words were out, they felt like a lie.

I am curious about him. Dangerously so. I want to see what he looks like when he’s genuinely happy, not just guarded. I want to peel back the layers of grief and isolation, the way I examine a darkroom negative until the image reveals itself. And that’s the fear—the real, sharp fear Tui’s caution awoke in me.

Falling for William feels like stepping onto an earthquake fault line. He’s so fragile, so intensely private. I am open. I feel things loudly. I express them openly. If I let myself care about him, really care, and he breaks—if he retreats again, if he snaps at me—I will shatter, too. My own history of abandonment is too fresh; my own foundation built on borrowed couches and cheap loans.

If you fall for someone who’s terrified of being left, you’re just setting yourself up to be the next one to go.

“I need to go,” I told Tui abruptly.

“Est, wait—”

I hung up before he could press me further. I walked over to the laptop. The folder was still open from earlier. I clicked it, scrolling past the professional headshots, And then, the one that stopped my breath: William asleep.

He was sprawled slightly on the floor, one arm thrown out. The light caught the vulnerable curve of his throat. His face was utterly unguarded—soft, peaceful, utterly surrendered to sleep. It was the most beautiful photograph I had ever taken. It was a secret I had stolen, a moment of grace I hadn’t earned.

I zoomed in on his closed eyes, the lashes casting faint shadows. He looked so young when he wasn’t guarding himself.

I felt a dizzying rush—a feeling too powerful for mere curiosity. It was the terrifying, reckless pull of connection. The desire to step into that quiet space he’d accidentally shown me and just stay there.

But Tui’s warning echoed: Curiosity killed the cat.

If I let myself fall for William, if I let him see my own open heart, and he retreated back into the safety of his isolation... I wouldn't just be disappointed. I would be broken, all over again. And this time, I wouldn't have Tui's studio to retreat to.

I looked at my phone, at the faint glow of the screen where Tui's name still lingered. I needed to talk to him. I needed to confess this reckless, dangerous feeling that was blossoming in my chest like a tropical, poisonous flower. I couldn't dump this onto him, not when he was fighting his own demons.

I stared at the wall, where my own reflection stared back—a lean, tired man with messy hair, a new contract in his pocket, and a heart that was finally, terribly, starting to care about someone else's solitude.

What if some connections are impossible to escape?

I sank onto my own worn couch, pulling my knees up to my chest, suddenly feeling the ghost of William's cold concrete floor under my own feet. I didn't want to risk breaking William's fragile peace. But more terrifyingly: I didn't want to risk breaking my own heart by trying.

My phone vibrated again.

William: Can I call you?

5:24 AM

The call lasted four hours and twenty-three minutes.

I know because when I finally hung up, my phone was at 7% battery, the screen was warm against my cheek, and the city outside had shifted. My small room felt smaller somehow, like the walls had leaned in to listen.

William's voice—low, careful, a little rough around the edges—still echoed in my ears. We'd talked about everything and nothing. His favorite paint brand, The way he once tried to skateboard down his hallway and broke a vase. How he hadn't left his apartment in three years, but sometimes he opened the balcony door just to smell the rain.

I'd told him about Tui. About the dorm days, the scholarship that saved me, the camera my dad gave me before he decided I wasn't worth keeping. William listened the way he had that morning—quietly, fully, like my words mattered. At some point, he'd laughed. A real one, surprised and unguarded. It had punched the air out of my lungs. Now I sat on the edge of my bed, staring at my phone like it held answers I was too scared to ask for.

My camera bag was still by the laptop, untouched since I got home. I should be

editing the photos. The publisher wanted the first round by Monday. But every time I opened Lightroom, all I saw was William's face on the rug, eyes closed, finally at peace. So I closed my eyes, trying to disappear into my dreams, to be completely devoured.

Ink & Ashes – afternoon

The studio lights were still off when I got there. The neon Ink & Ashes sign buzzed faintly above the door. I knocked twice, then let myself in. Tui was at his desk, sketching something on a tablet, a mug of what was definitely not coffee anymore sitting cold at his elbow. He looked up when I walked in, eyebrows rising.

"You look like you've seen a ghost." he said.

"Worse," I muttered, dropping into the chair across from him. "I think I'm becoming one."

He set the tablet down, a drawing of flowers glowing on the screen. Leaning back in his chair. "That bad?"

"The shoot was fine." I ran a hand through my hair. "Better than fine. He... opened up. Fell asleep while I was there."

Tui's expression softened. "That's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I exhaled sharply. "It's good. It's too good. And now I can't stop thinking about him."

"Thinking," Tui repeated, his tone carefully neutral.

I groaned, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes. "We talked for four hours tonight. On the phone. I don't even like phone calls. But with him, it was... easy. Natural. Like I'd known him for years instead of a day."

Tui was quiet for a beat. Then: "So what's the problem?"

"The problem." I said, dropping my hands. "I'm curious about him." I said, the words spilling out faster now. "I want to know everything. Why he paints. Why he stopped going outside. What he dreams about. What makes him laugh. I want to see him again. I want to hear his voice. I want—" I stopped, my throat tight. "I want too much. And that's dangerous." I looked away, staring at the tattoo designs pinned to the wall. A lotus. A phoenix. A coiled serpent. "Because I already know how this ends." My voice was flat. "I fall for someone who's broken. Someone who needs fixing. I give and give until there's nothing left. And then they leave. Or they stay, but only because I've made myself necessary, not because they actually want me."

Tui's jaw tightened. I knew I'd hit a nerve. We were both good at that—making ourselves indispensable so we wouldn't be abandoned.

"William's not like that," I said quietly. "He's not asking me to fix him. He didn't even ask me to come back. I offered. And that's the problem. Because I want to. I want to be the person he calls at midnight. I want to be the one who makes him feel safe. And that terrifies me."

"Why?" Tui asked, his voice gentler now.

"Because what if I'm not enough?" The confession scraped out of me. "What if I care too much, and he doesn't care enough? What if he gets better and realizes he doesn't need me anymore? What if—" I swallowed hard. "What if I fall in love with him, and it breaks my heart?"

Tui was silent for a long moment. Then he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "You remember what I told you? In the dorm?" I nodded. The night with the cigarette. The confession about his teacher. The way I'd held his hand and promised to keep it safe. "I spent years after that," Tui said slowly, "convinced that love was just another word for use. That if someone wanted me, it was only because I had something they needed. So I stopped letting people want me. I became the helper. The fixer. The guy who gave but never asked."

"Sounds familiar." I muttered.

"It does." He gave me a small, sad smile. "But here's the thing, Est. You already know William's broken. You saw it on day one. And you didn't run. You didn't try to fix him. You just... sat with him. That's not the same as making yourself necessary. That's just being human."

I looked down at my hands. "But what if it's not enough?"

"What if it is?" Tui countered. "What if you stop waiting for the other shoe to drop and just... see where it goes?"

"That's terrifying."

"Yeah." He huffed a quiet laugh.

Can I call you? Like he was scared I'd say no. Like my answer mattered. I thought about William's voice on the phone, the way he'd paused before asking. The weight of that settled over me. William wasn't just letting me in. He was reaching back.

"I'm going to see him." I said. "He asked if I'd come over. No work. Just... talking."

"Good, He sounds like someone who's curious too.."

"What if I mess it up?"

"You won't."

"You don't know that."

Tui leaned back, arms crossed, his gaze steady. "No. But I know you. And I know that if you don't go, you'll spend the rest of your life wondering what if. And that's worse than any heartbreak."

I stared at him. "When did you get so wise?"

"Hong," he said, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "He's been teaching me things."

"Like what?"

"Like it's okay to be scared. It's okay to want something even if it might hurt. And it's okay to let someone see you when you're not being useful or strong or necessary." He paused. "You taught me that too, you know. You didn't ask me to be okay. You just... stayed."

My throat tightened. "Yeah, well. You did the same for me. A hundred times over."

"Then maybe," Tui said softly, "it's time we both stop being so scared of letting people stay."

I walked home slowly, the city humming around me. My phone buzzed in my pocket. I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, my heart doing that stupid flutter thing again. I stared at the screen, my chest aching. I pocketed my phone and kept walking. The fear was still there, coiled tight in my chest. The voice that said curiosity killed the cat, that falling for William would break me, that I was setting myself up for pain.

But there was another voice too. Quieter. Steadier.

What if it doesn't? What if this time, you get to keep what you've found? I didn't know the answer. But for the first time in a long time, I wanted to find out. Even if it scared me. Even if it hurt. Because William's voice on the phone, soft and uncertain, asking Can I call you? felt like the beginning of something. And I wasn't ready to walk away from that. Not yet.